El Aleph – Guatemala Arc

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Chapter 1

Guatemala, 1973

A fearful *monstruo* [monster] was running rampant in the streets of the ancient capital of Guatemala, but the Antiguan people had more to fear than only the *hoz de la muerte* [scythe of death] wielded by a killer on the loose.

The menace of a killer hiding in their country festered within the capital like a plague or devil, but at the time, the forest, hills, and towns of Guatemala were embroiled in constant civil war fought by the army and revolutionaries. Rather than confronting this tumor upon their lives, they had to focus on fleeing the *grandes incendios* [major fires] that destroyed the familiar sights of their hometowns. They did anything they could to avoid glimpsing the shadow of death that loomed over them all like a circling flock of vultures.

In Antigua, the religious capital, a rite known as the *cuerpo de Cristo* [body of Christ] is conducted in the early spring, before *Pascua* [Easter] . This marks the beginning of *Semana Santa* [Holy Week] , during which Jesus experienced the *Pasión* [Passion (of Christ)] and *muerte* [death] in Jerusalem before his resurrection. In commemoration, a parade of floats decorated to represent these events proceeds down streets filled with buildings and churches built in the *época colonial* [colonial era] . When the parade begins, worshipers dressed in festival clothing lead the way, waving censers

filled with burning incense. The fragrant smoke fills the streets, creeping up narrow stairwells and into every nook and cranny of the churches and monasteries. They are followed by a brass band, then finally the parade floats, decorated with statues of Jesus and Mary. The roads the floats pass over are decorated with colorful *alfombras* [carpets] .

Each of these carpets is decorated with intricate patterns made up of a variety of materials including sawdust, vegetables, flowers, and leaves. They feature religious art, calligraphy, and even sculptures made entirely of bread. These one-of-a-kind works of art paint the city in vivid color. As this was an event worthy of distinction from even the other cultural touchstones of Antigua, people of all classes band together to devote themselves to the crafting of these *alfombras* . As citizens spend the entire year saving up for the festivities, even the soldiers standing guard from their cars avoid treading on the fruits of their labor.

People young and old form huge crowds in the streets. Firecrackers pop, confetti flutters in the breeze, and roadside carts sell souvenirs and tortillas. Girls come straight from their *primera comunión* [first Communion] dressed up and ready to dance. But this year, even in the midst of Antigua's liveliest celebration, several men coolly kept a strict watch over the crowd.

There was a high chance that the *monstruo* would appear at this year's *Semana Santa* . These men were agents employed by a certain organization, an organization that came to that conclusion after conducting a secret investigation towards the end of the previous year. The non-governmental organization worked internationally with its massive budget, increased its market shares in the science, welfare, and medicine industries, and even boasted a division devoted entirely to the study of supernatural phenomena. It was called the Speedwagon Foundation .

It all began with an opinion piece published in an American magazine titled "A Killer Lurking in the War-Torn Streets of Guatemala". The author of the article, a Mexican journalist, claimed the police were puppets of the military regime, more concerned with tracking down and arresting left-wing opponents than stopping

the killer. They claimed that over 20 murder cases containing the same *firma* [signature] had been covered up by the Guatemalan government. The CIA, an American organization that supported the pro-American dictatorship, refused to comment. However, news of what was happening in the ancient capital of Guatemala reached several human rights groups and non-governmental organizations, particularly the Speedwagon Foundation, who attached great importance to the killer's *firma* and dispatched investigators to the location. The team, made up of specialists from every field, spent five months investigating each crime scene and interviewing local police, families of the deceased, coroners, priests, psychiatrists, and representatives of both the military and the revolutionaries. At the same time, the team opened exhaustive investigations into local incidents. After carefully considering their findings, the group's representative, J.D. Hernández, sent a comprehensive investigation report to Foundation headquarters in Dallas, Texas. The contents of the report are as follows:

> All 27 victims were shot to death. Each victim had dozens of external injuries that closely resembled bullet wounds. However, no shell casings were discovered at any of the scenes. None were embedded in the wall nor the floor, and none were found in the victims' bodies. This commonality is what tied these cases to a single serial killer—the signature. The investigation team has taken to calling these "invisible bullets".

> All cases are locked-room mysteries, having occurred in locked hotel rooms, cars, and victims' homes. The possibility of the killings being caused by long-range sniping was considered, but there was no evidence of bullets having broken windows; indeed, one crime scene had a ventilation fan as the only potential entry point.

> Whether man or woman, young or old, *mestizo* [person of

mixed racial ancestry] or *indígena* [indigenous person] , the killer did not discriminate. The only thing victims had in common was their status as devout Christians.

In connection to (iii), incidents of destroyed holy icons and crucifixes at churches and monasteries of every denomination in Antigua spiked when the killings began. Images of figures such as Jesus and the Virgin of Guadalupe were among those destroyed. Analysis of fragments of destroyed bronze and plaster statues reveals they were not struck with a blunt object such as a baseball bat, but shattered by many small projectiles. Chances are high that this damage was also caused by the “invisible bullets”.

Extrapolating from the findings detailed in (i)~(iv), it can be concluded that the killer is likely to have a pathological revulsion towards holy iconography (holy statues, crucifixes, literature, artifacts, altars, etc.), also known as hierophobia. According to experts, hierophobics are more likely to fear their own religion vice rival religions. The killings may have been motivated by hierophobia triggered by worshipers openly displaying their beliefs through actions such as wearing crucifixes or making the sign of the cross.

In addition, the details on these “invisible bullets”, our greatest concern, are not yet understood. They seem to defy even the most fundamental laws of physics. Many of their traits cannot be explained by modern science. This may be a never-before-documented phenomenon. The author requests that an expert evaluate it for any potential link to the Ripple .

Attempts were made to reach out to the local government and

parish of Antigua, but canceling the *Semana Santa* was inconceivable. J.D. Hernández was on high alert as he roamed the city, his body tense. Making matters worse was the fact that Antigua's biggest parade of the year would be filling the streets with sacred iconography for an entire *week* .

If this *monstruo* , whose background and place of origin were still shrouded in mystery, saw the holy images atop every float, *the alfombras ,* and *las cruces* [the crosses] that were put up wherever one looked… If it gave in to its horrific urges and shot *balas invisibles* [invisible bullets] into the crowd of countless townspeople and tourists…

Where are you? Anybody—whether they were part of the crowd or working in the parade, a member of the clergy, a soldier in a car, a police officer, a peddler, or a *teporocho* [vagrant] —could be a suspect. Even investigators who had authority… Even *intelligencia* [intelligence (agents)] working in espionage. Any suspicious persons were investigated, and depending on the situation, the team was even prepared to overstep their authority and detain suspects. This killer could be hiding a superpower on par with *las Maravillas* [the Wondrous (Power)] … but there was nobody with a similar ability among the Foundation's troops. Could anybody stand against the *monstruo* putting Antigua's livelihood and celebration at risk?

It was late at night on the Friday of *Semana Santa* , but the festivities continued. Firecrackers echoed in the distance. The members of the Foundation's investigative team had split up to patrol the streets they had familiarized themselves with during their five-month stay. With each corner they turned, the mélange of scents in the air changed. It changed in heaviness and density—even the flavors dancing over their tongues transformed. The aroma of sawdust and flowers wafted from the *alfombras* , intertwining with the fragrant incense like waves crashing into one another in the dark of night. Shadows cast by torchlight formed figures on the walls, stacking atop one another and with the shadows of passersby carrying holy icons.

As J.D. Hernández passed the ruins of the Convento Santa Clara, two murky figures crept closer and closer to him. He could sense

them even without looking over his shoulder. There were two people there, their shadows overlapping. The shapes split apart and stood in rank with his own shadow.

The fit-looking young man to his left spoke. " *Señor* , he's on the move." His voice was husky. "Looks like that demonic murderer couldn't hold out any longer than Friday!"

He heard grunts coming from the frail youth to his right. The teenager was gesturing with his arms and body, trying to tell him something. According to the data J.D. had, this boy was born with some kind of speech impediment, but his amber eyes spoke volumes. Strangely enough, he could get his point across.

"The church… He's attacking holy images again?" J.D.'s eyes widened.

"He's talking about *La Merced* , the church just past the clock tower," the larger youth said.

"Are there any casualties?"

"He says the priest of the sacristy was attacked."

J.D. ran towards the church with the two locals following close behind, their footsteps ringing out on the stone tiles. The two men had been hired by the Speedwagon Foundation as local informants. Their names were Octavio and Joaquín. Octavio was tall and muscular, while Joaquin was smaller. Raised in a missionary-run *orfanato* [orphanage] , they had been thrown out on the streets when they strayed from the path of joining a seminary. Both were only in their late teens, but Octavio had made quite the name for himself in the streets.

Octavio had dark eyes like an herbivorous forest animal, but he would have moments when a worried expression flashed across his face, as if he was on the brink of doing something he couldn't take back. He was a man determined to make something of himself.

Joaquín was nimble like an animal as well, but there was a subtle wisdom behind his indecipherable gaze. It seemed both of the men had been involved in dirty work before, but J.D. couldn't care less about their ability to tell right from wrong and righteousness from sin. At least, not during *Semana Santa* . Casting a net of agents over the entirety of Antigua had proven impossible for the Speedwagon Foundation. They needed as many *silbatos* [whistles] to notify them of danger as they could get—that was where Octavio and his people came in.

On their signal, the back-alley network of *huérfanos* [orphans] , *teporochos* , and peddlers would swarm from street to street like blood and cells. They passed on information without straying far from the parades, skillfully slipping past the watchful gazes of army men and police. With one signal from Octavio, the *huérfanos* would scour every inch of the back alleys, dashing and leaping across the Baroque-styled rooftops.

J.D. had been the one to hire the informants, guided by his own intuition as an investigator. He had an eye for these things. These people loved their hometown, and they were surprisingly strong. Octavio had quickly agreed to the proposal: "Of course we'll help! What *tonto* [fool] would enjoy having a murderer sneaking around town?! And if we can flush him out during *Semana Santa* , that's even better!"

"If you see any sign of the bastard, get out of here. I'm not letting you engage with him," J.D. said as he ran.

"But I can be real useful in a fight," Octavio shot back, rolling his arms.

"Just do as I say, all right?"

"Look, Joaquín here can pull his weight too. C'mon!"

Joaquín grunted. J.D dug in his heels.

“No.”

J.D made a beeline for the church. On its stone walls was a tapestry depicting the words of a hymn. Lamplight illuminated the wooden door and transom window. When J.D. knocked, the priest of the sacristy inside unlocked the door and invited him in. He was covered in blood, still waiting for an ambulance to arrive. First aid had already been given to injuries on his shoulder and stomach. They resembled bullet wounds, but the priest stated that he hadn’t heard a gunshot or seen a muzzle flash.

The priest said he had been staying late to write entries in the parish register. It was past 10 PM, and he was woken from his dozing by the sound of a stone statue shattering. He was sure he locked the door up tight. Wondering if this was the sacrilegious beast he had been hearing about, he searched the sanctuary. The statue of Saint Francisco was in pieces near the pulpit, but the lock and windows were untouched. The priest looked outside, lighting the way with a candle. His intuition guided him behind the church, where he saw a man hidden in the shadows.

The man swayed from side to side, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. He was of average height, dark-skinned, and his bulky body was covered in hair. He looked to be an *indígena* , a group well-represented in town. The man was hiding his face in his hands, moaning pitifully as if he was crying, or trying to cry. But when he removed his hands, the man was smiling. No tears streaked his cheeks. The priest thought the man was a drug addict. Just as the priest was about to question his suspicious movements, the man brought his left hand over his head and flicked his wrist.

The priest immediately felt a searing pain in his right shoulder. A moment later, the left side of his stomach felt white-hot as well. He fell to the ground, screaming in fear and agony, and prayed to God and the Holy Mother Mary. He knew he had been shot, but why? The man had nothing resembling a gun. It was like an invisible bullet pierced his shoulder and made an instant U-turn to come back and burrow into his stomach.

“No doubt about it,” J.D. said. That man was the *monstruo* .

So the bullets had turned around? If that was true, these were no mere *balas invisibles* .

They were *balas mágicas* [magical bullets] .

Perhaps breaking the statues was like a pre-dinner drink for the *monstruo* , giving him the courage to strike out into the city for his main course free of remorse.

After borrowing a brass carbide lantern, J.D. took out the pistol he had been issued for self-defense and gave chase. First, he investigated the church’s perimeter, leaving no stone unturned. The informants wanted to accompany him, but J.D. told them to pass the news on to the other investigators, an order that Octavio reluctantly followed.

The *alfombras* around the streets had been thrown into disarray, statues of saints and steles laying shattered on the pavement. *This is terrible,* thought J.D. as he followed its path of blasphemous destruction. *It’s like coming here made it lose all self-control.* He asked bystanders whether they had seen a person suddenly collapse or anybody with unexplained wounds. After walking down *Ancha de los Herreros* [Road of the Blacksmiths, road in Antigua] , a street that looked up to the *Cerro de la Cruz* [Hill of the Cross, landmark in Antigua] , he turned left and instantly saw a souvenir vendor stumbling down the road.

“ *Policía* , *policía* ,” the vendor called. When J.D. asked her what had happened, she claimed that she had seen a man heading into the courtyard of a convent at the end of the road a few minutes earlier. When she tried sneaking over for a closer look, she heard the man groan several times like he was fighting the urge to vomit, but he failed soon after. The vendor saw him crouching over an unconscious nun and screamed, startling the man into fleeing underneath the arch and deeper into the convent.

Standing in the atrium of the convent, J.D. gazed up at the ceiling. The smoke of candles placed in a niche slowly crept up to the ceiling, gathering in thick, ochre-colored clouds. He heard rushed footsteps coming from the aisles behind him, followed by the sound of something heavy falling. After ordering the nuns frozen in fear to go back to their rooms, he approached the sounds' origin. A wooden pillar engraved with the image of the archangel Gabriel lay toppled on the floor. Behind it, a stone stairway descended underground, the trapdoor that hid it now ripped off its hinges.

He held his lantern up at eye level. The stone walls of the underground hallway stretched on and on into darkness. It was an escape tunnel, built by the priests' masons during the *época colonial* .

The silence was oppressive.

It was as if he had descended into *Infierno* [Hell] , as if time itself had no meaning here. He felt akin to some foreign object, helpless to displace the heart-stopping silence and dullness that filled the passageway…

He felt like a sacrifice left at the altar of some dark being. To the killers and beasts that crawled in the dark of night, perhaps the pitch-black underground was a soothing place to rest. A sound echoed from the end of the tunnel. The *monstruo* was here, without a doubt… Perhaps it was just his nerves, but the air seemed too thin. The uniform, painstakingly-built stone walls were sapping away his body heat. The scent of ice crept into his nose. He continued down the tunnel and turned right. He turned again, and kept going straight. The path never branched, but it was disconcertingly long. Surely it had to end somewhere, but he couldn't shake off the worry that he would be trapped down here.

The floors were clear of filth and sewage. Not a single rat scurried across his path. But the emptiness only made it stranger when he was struck by the sight of a stray dog's remains. It appeared to have wandered in from another entrance and died here three days ago. Maggots squirmed over its eyes, snout, and exposed ribs. More

made ripples under its bulging skin.

A whistling noise pierced the air, shattering the silence.

The next instant, a projectile struck his lantern.

Shards of glass and carbide fell to the ground.

What just happened?

He tried to relight it to no avail. The flame wouldn't kindle. Had he been attacked by those *balas invisibles* just now? The fact that he was a powerless human against a wielder of supernatural powers made no difference to him. He would find and capture this man all the same. That was the duty of an investigator. But right now, he had no way to keep up the pursuit. In these pitch-black tunnels, failing to put some distance between them could spell disaster. J.D. felt like he was being strangled by the darkness. He was being buried alive here beneath the streets of Antigua.

Why had the man aimed for the lantern when he could have struck his head or heart? Was it all just some game to him, a way to toy with his pursuer's mind? A chill ran down J.D.'s spine. He could feel a heaviness deep in his stomach.

His pulse quickened, and he felt colder and colder. The tunnel was so dark that it made no difference whether his eyes were open or closed. As he was feeling his way along the wall, stepping cautiously like a tightrope-walker, something tugged on the sleeve of his jacket.

He heard a grunt. One of the local boys had gone against J.D.'s orders and followed him in.

"Is that you, Joaquín?" asked J.D. "How'd you come all this way with no light?"

He couldn't hear Octavio or sense him anywhere nearby. Only his mute friend was here. Joaquín grabbed J.D.'s wrist and took off running as forcefully as he would to free a grounded boat. *He wants me to come with him?* There was no hesitation in the way the man was running; he didn't slow down even once. He seemed to understand that they needed to leave the tunnels right away, and he avoided obstacles with ease. The man's perfect navigation made J.D. want to ask the man if he could see in this darkness.

He can.

No… that's impossible.

No human could possibly see in a place devoid of even the faintest ray of light. J.D. assumed it was an advantage the locals had. Perhaps navigating these tunnels was a matter of knowing the streets above well enough, or perhaps it was that they knew this system so well that they could run through it blindfolded.

"Unh! Unnnh! Unnnh!" Joaquín grunted, pulling J.D. off-balance. The air filled with the sound of swarming flies, and something hard and sharp rained down on the pair. The pain J.D. felt as his cheeks and forehead were split open was like being slashed by an executioner's axe. Blood dripped into his eyes and mouth.

This is unbearable. J.D. ducked down as he ran. He groaned, trying to protect his face with his arms. The cloud of needle-covered projectiles they ran through buzzed like a swarm of insects. He was beginning to understand what people had meant by " *balas invisibles* ". It seemed these were what had destroyed the statues and ended the lives of so many townspeople. Were that the case, this wasn't the Ripple at all, but something else entirely…

Joaquín's navigational skills proved correct. Soon, the darkness began to fade. After climbing a narrow set of stone steps, they emerged in the plaza in front of a *catedral* [cathedral] .

Now that the parade had arrived here, it was hitting its climax. The largest statue of all had reached the end of the parade. It depicted Jesus carrying *la cruz* to the hill of Golgotha. A ring of countless spectators had gathered to watch. The illuminated *catedral* was a dazzling sight in the dim night. Holy banners had been unfurled from the windows in celebration. Confetti danced in the air, and vendors lined up in the plaza served brightly-dressed townspeople. Shopkeepers pushed and shoved to have a chance to pray to the statue of Jesus, brass bands blasted their instruments, and echoes of liturgical music were carried on the wind. It was as if Antigua itself was shaking with excitement. Impatience had whipped J.D. into a frenzy when he left the tunnel. *Where is he?* He could be set off by this chaos at any moment. Were they going to lose his trail after coming so close to finding him?

"Hey, over here!" A voice rang out over the crowd. "This is the guy! He just came running out of the tunnels!"

Octavio was fighting in the street, wrestling with somebody. The man struggled like a wounded animal, cracking stone tiles and stirring up clouds of dust as Octavio tried to pin him down by the neck. He was a scruffy, dark-skinned *indígena* , just as the priest had described.

Octavio knew about the underground passage, just like Joaquín. After ensuring that Joaquín followed J.D. into the tunnels, he had staged an ambush at the other end. It was a clever idea. Octavio had already done better than he ever anticipated, but fighting was always risky, no matter how much confidence one had. If that man truly was the *monstruo* of Antigua…

"You've got nowhere left to run! It's over, so stop resisting!"

Octavio let out a battle cry. J.D. ran towards them, yelling at him to let go. A crowd had formed around them. Foundation workers were rushing to the scene. Soldiers that had been guarding the *catedral* came over, blowing their whistles. An old lady *teporocho* came with her cart, and merchant children wandered over as well. "It's not safe here! Go home, now!" J.D. wanted to shout. The man

Octavio had pinned raised his arms and began to frantically move his fingers as if he was signaling in semaphore.

He heard something. *Bzz* …

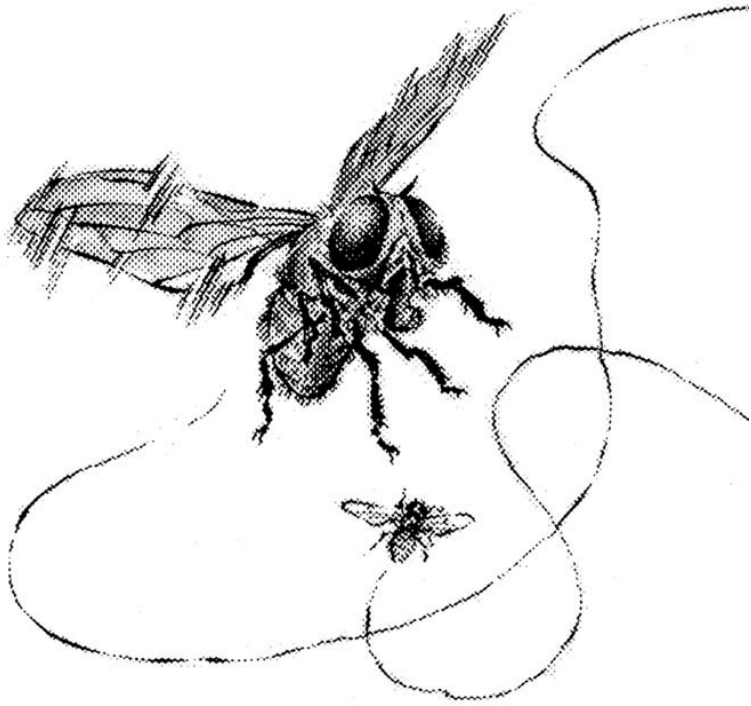
Bzz-zzz-zzzzz . The air shook.

Bzz- zzz-zzzzzzzz. The noise was coming from all directions. It reverberated from between buildings and streamed from the tunnel .

They flew in like leaves blown in the wind. Screams rang out. “ *¡Moscas! ¡Es un enjambre de moscas!* [Flies! It’s a swarm of flies!] ”

A huge swarm of what looked like flies descended upon them. The dark cloud blotted out the already-faint light of the night sky.

Were it daytime, it would be a *pseudo eclipse solar* [solar eclipse] — a band of darkness that blackened the entire sky. *Bzzzzz* , *bzzzzz* , *bzzzzzzzz* … The night itself quaked. The landscape seemed to vibrate before one’s very eyes. The people of Antigua had no way of understanding what this cloud of *moscas* was. But as inhabitants of the religious capital, their instincts told them that this could only be a sign of the *apocalypse* [apocalypse] .



Bzzz !

The scruffy *indígena* flicked his wrist in a motion like *posca con mosca* [fly-fishing] , and the swarm nosedived towards the earth.

J.D. could tell that these were no mere *moscas* . These were objects for the *monstruo* 's Eucharist.

Each fly sped like an assassin's bullet. It was a full-on air raid.

Bzz!

Bzzz-zzzzz!

Bzzz-zzzzz-zzz!

Bzz-zzzzz-zzzzz!

The flies were raining down like artillery, all aimed straight at Octavio.

These were no ordinary *moscas* . They were lethal weapons that targeted light and heat, hard enough to rip through flesh and shatter bone. Octavio's grip on the man loosened only when he was struck in the shoulder and back. He crawled away, covering his head, and scrambled behind cover. The *cruz* that the statue of Jesus was carrying cracked and then crumbled, its shards being lost into the murky, black whirlpool.

What remained of the statue made it look like it had been caught in an explosion. The *catedral* square had turned into a war zone. These projectiles were enactors of the *pasión* and the *muerte* . All the vivid hues of *Semana Santa* vanished in the inklike swarm, leaving the plaza dark and apocalyptic. Panicking people scurried in every direction, hiding beneath floats and knocking down stalls, only worsening the chaos. One man, Antigua's *monstruo* , stood at the center of it all, waving his arms as if to direct the *moscas* and chanting in a language that wasn't Spanish. Was he shedding tears of joy or of sadness? Grief, joy, regret, and religious ecstasy flashed across his face as he wept.

But as tears dripped down his chin, it looked as if this was something that shamed him to his very core, something he was doing under duress. J.D. wanted to approach him, but couldn't. His field of vision blurred. The shape of the *monstruo* about ten meters away warped, the air behind it wavering it like it was an *espejismo* [mirage] . The troops employed guerilla tactics against the *moscas* , firing a tracer shot with their automatic rifles, but no spray of gunfire would be enough to stop this *moscas bombardeo* [fly bombardment] . There was no way to fight back.

This was the worst-case scenario, a nightmare made reality. The *moscas* were clearly moving according to the man's will. J.D. had

no means of standing up to this tyrannical beast. Antigua's *monstruo* was indisputably blowing the *silbato de masacre* [whistle of massacre] .

The army's chain of command broke down, and the Foundation and police's forces didn't stand a chance. They needed to at least evacuate the citizens, but there was nothing to hide under in the open-air plaza. If they fled into the *catedral* , the winged harbingers of death could fly in through an air vent or window. The brass band's instruments, abandoned on the ground, were now dotted with holes. The *alfombras* were in ruins. Even the roofs of the army's vehicles looked like Swiss cheese. Children that hadn't gotten away in time cowered on the ground and the *teporocho* old lady had fallen down. It was every man for himself as townspeople fought to hide in the plaza fountain. The *moscas* ' attack wore on. J.D. wasn't able to help even a single person.

Is there no salvation to be had?

Even now, the Lord won't answer this ancient city's prayers?

Is this chaos stopping their prayers from reaching Him?

Suddenly, the scent of flowers filled the air.

J.D. looked down at his feet. Countless bits of glass and broken statues lay scattered on the ground.

The light of lanterns and torches refracted in the shards of glass, glittering faintly.

As if propelled by each tiny light, countless flowers and leaves were fluttering into the air.

Incredible… The pieces of the destroyed *alfombras* were floating straight up into the sky—no, in a spiral.

The leaves, flowers, and dyed sawdust danced up towards the heavens almost as if they had been electrified or imbued with new life. But it seemed as if they were not being pulled to Heaven, but pushed up by a miraculous, earthly wind…

So this is it. This is las Maravillas *we've heard about…* J.D. finally understood. It was an ancient art originating in Tibet, a secret technique that allowed one to create streams of energy. The greenery and sawdust had become conduits for the Ripple, piling atop one another in layers and forming a massive dome that covered the entire plaza. Acting as an electrified *mosquitero* [mosquito net] , it completely blocked the attacking *moscas* . It radiated the same life energy found in sunlight, repelling each attack from the *moscas* and keeping them out. She was here, hidden somewhere in the swarm. That woman had made it in time. While he had never heard of the Ripple being used this way, J.D. had heard the stories of its users. Over a quarter century ago, they had put down a threat larger than the one assailing Antigua right now—perhaps large enough to destroy the Earth itself. Those people could fix this—they were the only ones who could.

The chaos that had transpired here at this *catedral* did not yet have a name. Neither did the phenomenon that the townspeople had just borne witness to. But the latter had a name bestowed upon it by the Speedwagon Foundation the very next day: *Thousand-Color Overdrive* .

The *teporocho* woman who had fallen on top of an *alfombra* rose to her feet in one fluid motion. She had been crouched over it with her hands splayed, as if she was prostrating herself, lost in prayer.

Her appearance as a *teporocho* had only been a disguise, but she was indeed an old woman. Long *plata* -colored [silver-colored] hair flowed down her back like a waterfall when she took off her hood. Her face was half-hidden by a muffler, but there was a nobility about her eyes that pierced one's soul.

How old was this woman? J.D. didn't know for sure. What did she truly look like? He had heard that the Ripple had anti-aging

qualities that caused most practitioners to look twenty or thirty years younger, but at some point she had stopped concerning herself with such upkeep. Still, she aged naturally and beautifully, like a fine wine. She was filled with pure, distilled energy. Her curves were like that of the famous Stradivarius violins, and her high heels resembled the stakes pierced through vampire hearts. When they met eyes, she and J.D. exchanged a meaningful look. She walked towards Antigua's *monstruo* , scattering the remaining *moscas* with the rosewood cane she had on hand. He continued to thrash about, refusing to accept the fact that he had lost. With each step, she seemed to stride over the night itself.

The *monstruo* realized the old woman was approaching him. He shrieked something, likely in the language of the *indígenas* . The words streamed uncontrollably from his mouth like saliva. In stark contrast, the woman's words were in pristine Queen's English:

"The festival is over. What this ancient city wants tonight is silence."

J.D. dashed to where the two stood, giving orders to other investigators.

This woman, who was distinguished even among the other surviving Ripple users, had chosen to come here herself. The owner of a never-observed power, a sought-after subject for their research, could not be allowed to slip away.

The other investigators joined her as she drew her gun and drew closer.

"Would you like some help?" She spoke in a dignified, gentle voice. "If you won't shut your mouth, I can do it for you."

The *monstruo* was finally realizing the gravity of the situation. His face seemed to ask, "What the hell did that senile old lady just do? The *moscas* aren't listening to me anymore." His mouth stretched open as if he was about to let out a dying scream.

A faint hum rose from the back of his throat as a single *mosca* flew out, followed by a swarm that gushed out like overflowing water. They raced towards the woman like a driving rain, but she did not yield. She didn't even hesitate. She simply walked to the spot she was meant to be, a spot she had chosen before; her movements were not particularly urgent. Her attack was not an excessive show of power nor a flaunting of her abilities. She used her muffler, a garment brimming with luster like silk, to redirect the flow of the stream of *moscas* to her left. Then, she skillfully moved to close the gap and took the *monstruo* 's throat in her hands.

"Goodnight," she whispered as she flooded his system with the Ripple, as if she was scolding a puppy who had just soiled the carpet or lulling a rosy-cheeked little boy to sleep. The *monstruo* fell unconscious like he had been shocked with a cattle prod. There had been no need for J.D. and the others' help. She was skilled enough to bring that amazing dome into reality and choke a man just enough to put him to sleep. One could not help but be amazed upon witnessing this rare breathing technique known as the Ripple. After serving as a special advisor for the Speedwagon Foundation for a long time, she had been appointed as the head of the Paranormal Phenomena Section just a few years before. This woman could have been giving orders from the safety of the Foundation headquarters, but instead she went back to the field, working directly with investigators. Even now, she was in active service.

"Apologies if my late arrival inconvenienced you. A matter in Peru kept me occupied longer than I expected."

She handed over the restrained *monstruo* to the team of Foundation medics that had arrived. The beautiful woman didn't forget to acknowledge the accomplishments of her subordinates.

"Look at this fly," she said, examining one of the bullets resting atop her palm. "It was a ferocious thing with skin as hard as cast-iron or steel, but now it's returned to its natural form. It must be because its master fell unconscious. Hernández, we have to find a way to answer the questions you laid out in your report."

“Ma’am, do you think this isn’t the Ripple after all?”

The doubts J.D. had been holding on to all this time were confirmed with a nod of his superior’s head.

“The Ripple is the energy of the sun—a stream of life energy. But I believe *this* stems from something… darker, deeper. The dark side of the human psyche made manifest. This encounter has only given my theory more weight. The world is transforming… or perhaps it transformed long ago. We must work to understand this phenomenon. South America marks the center of a whirlpool of change that will only grow larger…. large enough to envelop the entire planet.”

At this point in time, at this place, the future and past would meet —the fate of the Speedwagon Foundation was caught in a whirlpool of swirling time, a historical turning point. According to records, the *monstruo* of Antigua would go on to become the first in a long series of investigations carried out in the following years. No resource was spared in the study of this unique group of abilities. Although their origins were connected, any similarities shared with the Ripple were only surface-level. This *nueva Maravilla* [new Wondrous (Power)] , still unnamed in April 1973, would eventually be known all throughout the world. The woman was trying to make J.D. and the other Foundation members recognize the gravity of this knowledge. These abilities were awakened from within… The woman’s brilliant, clear blue eyes could see the turbulent destiny laid out before her bloodline.

When she spoke with the investigators later, she declared that there must have been some trigger that caused the man they encountered that evening to awaken to his powers.

Lisa Lisa had a theory. “He must have been struck by the Bow and Arrow .”

Chapter 2

Lisa Lisa had a theory. “He must have been struck by the Bow and Arrow .”

Several days after the end of the chaos-ridden *Semana Santa* , *Pascua* arrived. Prayers were offered at that time for the countless souls that had been taken by the *monstruo* without intervention from Christ. *Biblia* [Bible] readings, Anointings of the Sick, passing hearses, funeral masses—these had been part of daily life for Guatemalans for some time now. Their lives were in disorder; families and relatives had been caught up in guerrilla warfare. News of horrific massacres carried out at Mayan villages began circulating. As long as the *FAR* [Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes – Rebel Armed Forces] continued to fly the flag of rebellion against Guatemalan forces, *las muertes súbitas* [sudden deaths] would continue to be a part of daily life.

Fragrant smoke hung in the air as the pallbearers descended the church steps. A long procession of grieving families walked to the cemetery. Even with the *balas invisibles* exterminated, they remained vigilant for real bullets flying in from across the street.

The Speedwagon Foundation workers passed the solemn funeral procession, jostled about by the throngs of crowds as they walked the city streets. In front of the church was a market. Wearing a pair of sunglasses, her muffler, and a purple cape, Lisa Lisa looked over the market stalls, listening to J.D. Hernández’s report as he walked beside her. Lanterns, *las cruces* , and embroidery depicting the quetzal, Guatemala’s national bird, created a colorful backdrop. At this market, no raw meats or fish were on sale, and thus there was no stench in the air—only the fragrance of beans and freshly-ground maize flour. Women of all ages, from sweet *muchachas* [girls] to *abuelas* [old women] , were mixing flour with water, forming balls of dough, and then flattening them out by tossing them from one hand to another. After cutting out discs with oil cans, the dough would be cooked into tortillas on a charcoal-heated griddle. Lisa Lisa smiled only at the women who didn’t pressure the shoppers to buy their fresh tortillas, her expression not souring even

when she was bumped into by passersby. She took in the everyday sights of the country she was visiting, strained her ears to listen to its sounds, and breathed in its scents.

"Even now that we've taken the killer in, the citizens are still anxious about the threat of civil warfare breaking out at any time," J.D. said, continuing with his report. "Many are below the poverty line and can't find jobs. People who want to stop living like strays are forced to seek asylum in other countries, but there's the chance of dying a dog's death and being eaten by the local wildlife either way… That's the reasoning they gave me. That's why they wanted to help rid the city of that fiend."

"…That must mean *those two* have done quite the good deed," Lisa Lisa replied. J.D. could hear a scolding to him and his comrades hidden in her words. Without help from the local boys, they may have never uncovered the *monstruo 's* true identity.

"That's exactly right. And I take full responsibility for putting them in danger. I had them get medical attention from the Foundation's doctors, but they must want compensation or something. They're asking to meet with a representative of our investigation team. I told them I would hear them out myself, but…"

"That's fine. I'll meet with them," said Lisa Lisa. She began looking through the market for gifts appropriate for a hospital visit.

"But ma'am, we're not sure what their demands are…"

"I've been wanting to meet them as well."

The churches occupying the streets of Antigua all looked Catholic in architecture, but they were actually buildings erected in the 1520s. After burning the holy sites of the Mayan peoples to the ground, *conquistadors* had used the rubble to rebuild.

The K'iche' were the indigenous peoples of that time, a proud and brave group even among the other Mayans. They fought to the last man when the *conquista* [conquest] came to their doorstep at the Mayan holy city of Q'umarkaj. But when the few K'iche' survivors were finally backed into a corner, Spanish missionaries took it upon themselves to teach them to love and respect the Christian God. "Believe in the Lord. Kneel before la cruz ."

This was a religious *trasplante* [transplant] , a process carried out in colonial territories all over the world. The K'iche' people stopped rebelling and gave in to their demands, pretending to make the sign of the cross while clinging to their own religion in secret. The hidden indigenous religion and Catholicism intermingled, in some cases even producing syncresis, making Antigua a mosaic of different religions. Even four or five centuries later, prayers in a mix of the K'iche' and Spanish languages can be heard echoing from cathedrals. Some buildings contain altars with no connection to Christianity. In this city, it's common to see aged couples come to a church to offer flowers and incense to Mayan shrines and pray in the K'iche' language, then leave without offering the crucifixes and *las cruces* so much as a glance.

Some of those involved in the tragedy that had played out in front of the cathedral had K'iche' blood flowing through their veins.

One of those people was the *monstruo* of Antigua, now confined to a cell…

Fabio Ubuh.

Fabio, an *indígena* who had just turned 30, had been laid off from his job working at a dairy-processing *maquiladora* [a foreign-owned factory where imported parts are assembled by lower-paid workers into products for export] . The Speedwagon Foundation had given Guatemalan police the rundown of how to safely keep Fabio in custody. In their analysis, they had concluded that Fabio's ability to freely control the *moscas de hierro* [iron flies] did not involve

manifesting the *moscas* themselves. As long as he was confined to a sterilized room with no ventilation shafts, he had no way of blowing the *silbato* [whistle] or committing criminal acts. As part of the terms of exchange, the Speedwagon Foundation was allowed to question the suspect. After a series of long visits from J.D. where the two did nothing but sit in silence, Fabio finally caved in and began to talk.

He and his younger brother and sister were raised by their mother in Chichicastenango, where he was able to receive an elementary education at a Catholic boarding school. But tragedy shattered his life — his family had offered refuge to guerrilla fighters, only to be rounded up by the same soldiers in the town square and massacred as a warning for the others. He came to believe that God was cruel and apathetic, ignoring the indigenous people's cries for salvation. Fabio decided to sneak out of this cursed land. He gave a *pollero* [human smuggler] all of his money to smuggle him across the border, but was robbed of all of his possessions and left for dead a stone's throw from his freedom.

After finding himself back in Antigua, Fabio was deeply troubled. "Why is this happening to me?" he wondered. As he was brought from the *Ancha de los Herreros* up to the *Cerro de la Cruz* , he realized just how much he despised the Christian iconography that filled the city. This was no different from enslavement on a *gringo* 's [white man] *plantación* [plantation] ! Fabio understood now. The money coming in from larger countries, the coup d'etats backed by the CIA, the neverending bloodshed—it was all because of these churches built on Mayan holy land. And when he found out, he was terrified. He believed the reason his family and his people were never saved is because they were praying to pagan gods—because they were still living in their world. So Fabio strove to annihilate the religion he had been forced into. Every time a holy day drew near, he rejoiced in his compulsion to destroy statues of saints and murder the believers who personified the religion he had left. All of these acts were accomplished with " *El Señor de las Moscas* [Lord of the Flies] "—

"Hang on a second," J.D. asked at that point. "That name you just said… does it refer to the power you created, the religion you came

up with, or is it a name you thought of for yourself after learning to control the *balas invisibles* ?"

"You'll never see it, no matter how hard you try." As he stared at the latticed window, Fabio began to laugh. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he did. "You're just like the rest of them… You can't see it, either. I'm the only one who can. And I can't tell you much about something you can't even see. You can't understand it… You can't… You can't. It's undeniable proof that I've evolved into my true self… A true idol for me to worship."

He began to ramble in his excitement, rendering the latter half of his testimony practically unintelligible.

It was clear that Fabio displayed signs of hierophobia. The anger and hatred of a man who had lost his family and his future had transformed into urges for revenge, blasphemy, and destruction. As J.D. transcribed Fabio's testimony, he scribbled " *El Señor de las Moscas* " into the file's margins. Were these the hallucinations of a deranged man? A transforming split personality? An alter ego?

Upon hearing this, Lisa Lisa decided not to pass judgment just yet. Instead, she told him to focus on getting more testimony out of him for the time being. The important thing now was when, where, and how Fabio had acquired his ability.

"That *mosca* -controlling bastard was K'iche' too , wasn't he?"
When they visited the medical facility in Antigua, there was one more *indígena* there. "I don't know who the hell he thinks he is, but he's an embarrassment to K'iche' everywhere. I'm nothing like that murderous freak. I'm telling you, if those *moscas* hadn't attacked me, I'd have choked that son of a bitch out right there."

"That would've made you a real *salvador* [savior] ."

“Yeah, better me than that *abuela* .”

“Hey, you ought to watch what you s—”

“Tell me, what was your name again?” Lisa Lisa brought her subordinate under control as she questioned the man in the hospital bed.

The descendant of the Mayans gave Lisa Lisa hints before he properly answered, offended that anyone in this town would be stupid enough to not know the name of a man as world-renowned as him. “I’m…”

“O…?”

“Oct…?”

“Octavio!”

The only person who cheered after Octavio finally unveiled his name was Joaquín. As the son of white and indigenous parents, Joaquín wasn’t an *indígena* , but a *mestizo* . Despite having different bloodlines, races, skin colors, and eye colors, Joaquín and Octavio had been together from the orphanage to the streets. Now, they were still together in their working lives. Possibly due to their upbringing, they weren’t just childhood friends, but a duo that seemed inseparable, as if they were kin.

“So you’re the boss of *Señor* Hernández and all these others? Really? An *abuela* like you?”

Undeterred by all the men lining up at this woman’s beck and call, Octavio stared curiously at Lisa Lisa without a modicum of restraint. As part of Octavio’s compensation for working with them, the Speedwagon Foundation had offered its own doctors to attend to his serious wounds from the *moscas bombardeo* . They offered far better resources, quality of care, and surgeries than any normal

hospital. Octavio's impressive willpower was undoubtedly a factor in his remarkably fast recovery. After telling the investigators that he wanted to speak with their boss, he demanded as much as he could get away with. The investigators crowding the room were on edge, and J.D. was worried as well. In spite of that, Octavio spoke disrespectfully to the woman.

"If I'm not allowed to call you *abuela* , what works better? What's your name, *Señora* ?"

"I am Elizabeth Joestar. You can call me whatever you like."

"All these other guys call you Lisa Lisa. Can I call you that too?"

"I don't mind."

J.D. and the others were anxious—there was no knowing what expression she was making behind her sunglasses. She sat down in a chair next to the hospital bed without complaint and steepled her hands in front of her face.

Contrary to the impolite way he was speaking, Octavio was actually embarrassed with himself. His face betrayed his bewilderment at the way this white woman swayed her hips as she walked, brushed her silver hair from her shoulder like a *muchacha* , had a gorgeous body despite her age, and sat with her legs gracefully crossed.

How old was this *Señora* ? She was obviously an older woman, but her mannerisms and demeanor kept him constantly second-guessing himself. Her elegant sitting posture was faintly seductive despite her age, and he found her magnetic. As a certain movie producer put it, she had "an eroticism only an older woman could have". Just this taste of it at their first meeting was enough to fluster Octavio.

"Look, *Señora* Lisa Lisa. How'd a lady like you, old and feeble and covered in spidery veins, pull that huge move off? Was it divine will that let you stop the *moscas* just by kicking up the sawdust in those *alfombras* ? What are you all after, anyway?"

“I seem to recall telling you not to get too involved,” J.D. admonished him from his bedside. “We made a deal. You agreed to pull out of this as soon as the killer was captured. We appreciate what you two have done for us—that’s why she came to meet you face-to-face.”

“But seeing all of that got me all fired up.”

“Forget about it. And don’t let any other citizens know about it.”

“Hey, Joaquín doesn’t that put you on edge?”

Seeing Octavio’s expectant glance, Joaquín gave a grunt of agreement.

Lisa Lisa turned to look at him. “You’re the one who led Hernández through the passageway, aren’t you?” He didn’t have the same presence as his friend, but his eyes shone with the same curiosity about this *bruja* [old woman] .

“So you’re Joaquín… and you’re Octavio.” Lisa Lisa looked at both the youths in turn. “Is it hush money that you want, or would you rather learn the secret to my magic tricks so you can show off to your orphan friends?”

“That’s not it… What we want is…”

Octavio took a deep breath, and after pausing for effect, began to speak.

“We were waiting for this.”

With a seriousness that looked rehearsed, Octavio locked eyes with Lisa Lisa.

Joaquín grunted in agreement.

“We were waiting for something like *this* to happen. An opportunity to see what lies beyond the borders of this backwater town, this heartless, boring world… We’ve been waiting our entire lives. I don’t know what exactly it is that you people do, but you’re going after more people like that *mosca* bastard, right? Don’t you fly all over the world solving mysteries, just like you’re doing here?”

“Right? You do, right?” A flame burned in Octavio’s eyes, and Joaquín was leaning forward with his eyes wide open. “I bet you never expected your informants to have a dream like this. But we’re not just gonna let you make us sit here with our hands tied like all the others. You can’t just pass us by like the *nubes* [clouds] rolling over this island city. You’ve given us this chance—just take us with you. We want to get out of here.

Have you ever thought about it?

The endless civil war.

The streets reverberating with the constant sound of gunfire and explosions.

The days where you could smell the wounds and blood in the air, the same smells of the *pasión* .

The rotten youth we’re leading, plagued with worries about food, unable to make an honest living.

The utter lack of adventure and freedom I went through after climbing the ranks.

When the sun sets and the colors of twilight blanket the town, we climb a hill and watch the stars as they rise over the horizon. But we can only see as far as the horizon. The sky may as well be a dark, featureless wall. No matter what we hope is outside of Antigua, no matter what we believe in, the view from that hill may as well be all that exists. Have you ever thought about…

…how *suffocating* a life like that must be?"

Lisa Lisa assured him that she understood quite well. But even after listening to this story of Joaquín and Octavio's poor circumstances, she was unswayed. "I'm afraid the Speedwagon Foundation doesn't involve itself with humanitarian aid, and we don't recruit local hires."

"But—but don't you have some kind of official test for people to join the Foundation? Joaquín and I are young and able-bodied… and even when *Señor* Hernández pushed us away, we were more helpful than any of those other *cabrones* [bastards] you hired! Please, just let us do an interview, or a test… anything!"

"Can you give it a rest already?!" barked J.D. "Didn't you only take this job so that you could protect the city you lived in and bring the murderer to light?"

"That *was* it… until we met that man, *Señor* Hernández. But when we saw what he was capable of, we talked it all over…"

Joaquín grunted in agreement. J.D. came up with a rejection in his superior's stead.

"The power that man used has nothing to do with you."

"Didn't you praise me back there? You said I did a good job!"

"You were only useful to us because of the network of people you were working with."

"Don't look down on me, *Señor* Hernández! You might have just chalked it up to me being a local, but that's not the only reason we were able to help you capture that man. I've never told anybody about this before, but the truth is, Joaquín and I have special abilities like that, too…"

“Special abilities?”

As J.D. questioned that, the wrinkles between Lisa Lisa’s eyebrows gave a tiny twitch.

“It’s nothing as terrifying as that *hombre mosca* ’s, but maybe it’s because we’re *huérfanos* who are very close to the gods… that we got these gifts. The two of us are capable of perceiving angels and demons, the evil and the righteous, and light and darkness with our eyes and our noses. We’re usually right on the money, right, Joaquín? So, I’m confident that we can serve some purpose to you, *señora* . Let us serve as an extension of your hands, eyes, and nose.

Lisa Lisa sat in silence with one eyebrow raised, as if she was questioning the veracity of Octavio’s claims.

Please let us join the Speedwagon Foundation… Please take us with you…

These boys were confident in their ambition, but she couldn’t grant their wishes. She was not one to bend the rules.

But she did allow her lips to form a smile, as if she had secretly picked up on the two teens’ worth, their resolve, and the fate they were burdened with perhaps using that ability of hers, which reached far and wide like a ripple. She wouldn’t let them join right away. But she would subject them to a test. She would present them with a challenge.

Chapter 3

Now, to the denizens of the future.

To those of you reading this immense record in an effort to relive

the past…. It's best if you familiarize yourselves with the boys from Antigua all over again. After all, they were not content to follow reverently in the footsteps of the Speedwagon Foundation's leading paranormal investigators, J.D. Hernández and Elizabeth 'Lisa Lisa' Joestar. No—instead, they surpassed them and charged straight forward into the unknown, into an era of constant upheaval. They were nothing short of legendary, a duo whose exploits ought to be marked down in history.

Look at this young man, this owner of both a massive body and voice. Your eye may first be caught by his bronze skin, obsidian-colored eyes, his chin and cheekbones seemingly sculpted with machine-like precision, or his standing height, most of which was made up by his legs, surpassing even 185 cm. He was proud of his K'iche' heritage, but he was unusually tall for a Mayan, making him more closely resemble a Uruguayan *fútbol* [soccer] player. His chest was so well-toned, it could make anyone who looked at it want to do 30 push-ups out of shame. He had only just turned 19, but his brows conveyed the disposition of a bold, brave, and peerless king. He was a nice man who would throw himself in front of a car to save a *cachorro* [puppy] . He had a cool way of smoking, he was excellent at telling jokes, and he was popular with the *muchachas* . Had he had a more fortunate childhood, he could have gone straight to Hollywood and played a younger Clint Eastwood.

The man's name was…

O… ?

Oct…?

Octavio !

And he wasn't full of undeserved bravado. All throughout his time in the *orfanato* and on the streets, Octavio had never relinquished his status as *numero uno* .

Many of the *huérfanos* of Antigua had felt shame when they

garnered a glare from his *halcón* -like eyes.

Despite his merits, Octavio Luna Kan was also very troublesome. He was addicted to the limelight—he'd lash out any time a friend got too clever or threatened to steal his thunder. He couldn't go a day without calling somebody a *pepino marchito* [limp-dicked bastard] at least once, and he would often be motivated by his pride and ambition to fly into a rage, getting into fights and wreaking havoc. He was a man who knew no fear and believed he could change *todo* [everything] if he tried hard enough. But the other man, a *mestizo* , couldn't name a single thing he'd like to change. Absolutely *nada* [nothing] .

Look at this man. Look at Joaquín Ruiz-Jorruda .

It's rumored that in later years, this other young man's hidden potential piqued Lisa Lisa's interest.

He did not possess his partner's loquaciousness or well-projected voice. The teenager simply wanted to be as free as the wind, living a life free of killings and strife.

He had a memory sharp enough to write out priests' sermons down to the very word, the ability to carefully monitor every inch of his surroundings, and would do any task asked of him without grumbling or complaining. Joaquín was well-suited to be a Speedwagon Foundation investigator, but he would have never thrown himself into such a state of flux were it not for his friend's pleading.

Joaquín's vigilance allowed him to act as a sort of protector for Octavio. If Octavio could hear all the words flooding Joaquín's mind, they'd sound a bit like this:

"If Octavio wants to go somewhere, I'll go with him. If he wants to leave this place, I'll leave with him. I'll always stick to him like a

burr—I even join him when he goes on dates with *muchachas* . I'm Octavio's foil, his voice of reason—the *Pepito Grillo* [Jiminy Cricket] to his *Pinocho* [Pinocchio] . I'm the *bardo* [poet] who writes songs of his exploits as a *salvador* . I'm the one who follows him, picking up the caution that he threw to the wind. And I'm happy in this role. Octavio isn't just some naive knight of chivalry and justice; sometimes, he can be uncooperative, or do things I don't like. But ever since we met as kids, he's the only one who's been able to understand a mute like me. We're inseparable.

So, can you understand my reasoning? If Octavio wants to join the Foundation, I'm joining too.

If he says this world is full of surprises and adventures made just for us, I can believe it too.

And if we get an opportunity to leave Antigua, I'll try to seize it just as hard as he is. But I've never been able to put voice to all these thoughts."

After they were pulled from the brink of misfortune, Octavio and Joaquín, the *Huérfanos de la Tormenta* [Orphans of the Storm] , were given their first assignment, a challenge that would intertwine their fates with the Speedwagon Foundation's . They were to investigate whether there were more people hiding abilities like Fabio Ubuh's.

"If that's all it is, we can have the info come straight to us!" After all, there was already a massive network of informants out in the field. They had their informants ask people whether they had seen any suspicious activity, unexplained fevers or illnesses, strange occurrences. They questioned everyone they could find—men making repairs to the colonial buildings, the priests and nuns, the *ladróns* selling stolen goods, the pimps and prostitutes, the float makers and the jadeworkers.

They managed to get information from even the most stubborn and sly old foxes—even an eccentric old lady, who at first refused to answer anything asked of her. But her walls came down when

Octavio fed her a sob story. “My father was put in the hospital, and he still hasn’t woken up. The police won’t do anything… I just want to prevent a tragedy like this from happening again.” It was enough to make her tear up. Crafting elaborate stories to appeal to people’s emotions was their specialty. They teased information out of people, shut down any lines of questioning, and formed a three-dimensional image of the town’s rumors by bringing together the scraps of information like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle.

The next assignment was to find out how Fabio had acquired the ability to control these *balas invisibles* . They went to the *maquiladora* that the unfortunate Fabio had been working at and interviewed the landlord of the apartment he had been living in, but J.D and his team had already covered most of the same ground. *Is she trying to pit us and the other team against each other in a race to the truth? She and the other investigators will leave this country eventually. We need to get some useful information to her before then, or it’ll be adiós before we know it!*

“I’ll bet *Señora* Lisa Lisa and the others have already come to the conclusion that Fabio wasn’t born with the power to control those *moscas* .”

Seems that way , Joaquín said with just a nod and a look.

“Maybe he got into the dark arts, or he made a deal with *el Diablo* [the Devil] …”

Yeah, something must have happened to him at some point.

“Guess just searching the area can only get us so much.”

That sounds about right. Just investigating here won’t be enough.

“His parents were killed in his home village…” Octavio grit his teeth. “And when he drifted back to Antigua, he had become a *hombre mosca* . If we assume he met with the Devil in *Infierno* …”

Before he drifted back to this town?

"Let's see if we can find those smugglers."

Octavio had guessed that they needed to look for a *pollero* who worked in smuggling people across the border. The guerrilla soldiers and citizens who were being chased, the *teporochos* and paupers out of work, and the *soñadors* [dreamers] eyeing new lands were all constantly trying to escape to Mexico to the north, but the heavily-guarded borders necessitated *polleros* who ferried people across illegal routes. Most of them had bad intentions, and there had been incidents where customers who couldn't pay tens of thousands of Guatemalan quetzals were robbed of everything they had and left deep in the forest. Octavio knew of a couple of men who had met that fate: *Impaciente* [Impatient] Pedro Ochoa and *Cuchillo* [Knife-Wielding] Enrique. Large groups of people had tried their luck and vanished from town, never to be seen again. Fabio too had spoken of his attempt to cross the border with his coworkers at the factory. He had been caught and paid the price, but the fact that he lived to tell the tale made him better off than others in his position—most were shot to death by border patrol officers. Was it possible that Fabio had already obtained his *monstruo* powers at that point in time?

They expanded their search to the neighboring villages. They traveled between them all around the clock, something only possible with the help of Octavio's back-alley network. News of this reached the *polleros* whose businesses were not advertised on main street billboards. By piecing together the whispered rumors and secrets passed from one informant to another, they pinned down the *pollero* who claimed Fabio's home village as his turf.

"…So, I heard the boss of that *pollero* changed a while ago, right when Fabio was trying to cross the border. I've heard the whole organization's gotten shadier ever since, doing things like demanding exorbitant fees, forcing people to walk through dangerous areas, and letting people escape in the woods just to do target practice on them. Isn't it terrible? It's like they're hunting humans!"

The deadline hadn't yet elapsed, but it had taken four days since the beginning of the mission for the pair to give Lisa Lisa a report of their findings at the *dormitorio* [bedroom] she was staying at. Octavio triumphantly offered up his report, confident they had passed their screening and acting like it had been no trouble at all as a thoroughly beaten J.D. and his team watched on. The man was doing his best to look like the rookie of the year and prove his usefulness, but in reality, he just seemed like a Labrador who had obediently brought back a bone.

" *Señora* , it seems one of these *pollero* gangs is stationed in a small community in the forests northeast of Guatemala City. We know its general location, so we could show you there. All we ask in exchange is that you allow us to accompany you there as official members of your investigation team."

Lisa Lisa had been quiet, as if she was scrutinizing the report given to her, but she suddenly raised her head and studied the fluorescent lights on the ceiling of the hospital room.

"Did you know that fluorescent lights are actually flickering at an imperceptible rate?" She questioned Octavio and Joaquín in a soft voice.

"Oh, I didn't know that. I don't see it flickering at all…" Octavio rolled his eyes as he looked up. *What's this abuela going on about?* He shared a look of puzzlement with Joaquín.

"That's because it flickers about a hundred times a second. It can't be seen with the naked eye."

"Really? Doesn't seem that way to me."

"It's in a constant cycle of light, dark, light, dark."

Her eyebrows twitched slightly, but she didn't blink. Lisa Lisa was fixated on the light.

“When I was young, I would stare up at lights like these just like I am now, trying to spot the tiny interval of darkness. I wanted to see that darkness that peeks out from between the flashes a hundred times in a second, and yet no human eye could ever observe it.”

The light shamelessly cast its pale rays all throughout the room, as if there was no darkness taking refuge within.

“You and I live beneath these rebellious rays of light. But there are also some who live beneath those flickers of darkness.”

“Light and darkness…”

“There is another world hidden in the gaps of our own, one that our reasoning does not apply to. There, all living beings see their own shadows deepened by that of death itself. Our worlds exist so close together, but the border can never be crossed.”

Lisa Lisa lowered her gaze to meet Octavio and Joaquín’s eyes, her expression serene.

“Our duty is to capture that flicker of darkness. There are some things I’d like to ask you two. Working in the Speedwagon Foundation is not like working with Interpol or in espionage. It is not a secret society like the Freemasons or a social club that pursues its own interests. Although we wear black suits, there are no symbols, coat of arms, or decorations on our ties or cufflinks. The investigators themselves are essentially obscured like a cipher, hiding from all of society. Are you ready to become that?”

Oh! Is this like the interview before I get the job? Octavio perked up. Erasing all evidence of his existence and hiding from society would be a cinch. In fact, the two of them took pride in their ability to do so as *huérfanos* .

Lisa Lisa went on. “Going back to the subject of your special abilities… That report was only made possible through them, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, that is correct.”

“That was quite the feat. I was surprised you finished so quickly.”

“Thank you, *meñora* .”

“I have one more question for the two of you.”

“What would that be?”

“What is the biggest lie you’ve told in your life?”

“Well, I… hate to lie.” Octavio was first to respond. “I’ve even done some pretty crooked and violent things just to avoid lying.”

“Hmm… What about you, Joaquín?”

Joaquín looked deep in thought as he picked up a notepad and pen next to the telephone and began to write.

Saying that I haven’t ever lied is probably the biggest lie I’ve ever told.

Lisa Lisa smirked. Apparently, she liked Joaquín’s answer.

“Now, get packed and show me to the *polleros* .”

Black vultures flew in arcs in the sky above them.

As they drove along this road, flanked by tropical rainforest and weaving between mountains, they felt an invigorating breeze.

There were three four-wheel-drive cars prepared for them. J.D., now driving one of the cars, seemed unaccustomed to the fact that his local informants were now wearing the same suit as he.

Octavio, Joaquín, and Lisa Lisa were all in the same car. The two men had received a thorough rundown of the 63-year-old Speedwagon Foundation's philosophy and rules, and current operations of the Paranormal Phenomena Section from Lisa Lisa before leaving. As apprentice investigators, they were not allowed to carry guns. The division they were in was not combat-oriented in the first place—the weapons provided to investigators were for self-defense in zones of conflict. The sole exception to this rule was Lisa Lisa, who needed no weapon other than herself.

The dense rainforest around them began to thin; before long, they were able to see massive triangular pyramids made of stone from their windows. Four or five of them towered high in the sky. "These must be Mayan ruins," mused Lisa Lisa. The Speedwagon Foundation prided itself on the scope and achievements of its research in its study of archaeology and ancient civilization. Lisa Lisa herself was closely involved in these efforts and well-learned enough in the subject to outshine an expert.

Octavio and Joaquín had learned about history from her. According to their *viejo maestro* [old master] , the ancient Mayans' settlements had been made of stone, most of which was limestone. They increased maize yields with selective breeding, and from that cultivation and harvest, a religion of nature worship was born. As they considered accurate predictions of when the dry and rainy seasons would come and go more important than anything else, mathematicians and astrologists had a higher place in society. They built the pyramids with observation rooms standing higher than the treetops, then shut themselves inside to record the motions of the sun, moon, stars, and planets. Scientists have theorized that their calendar was more precise than even the modern Gregorian calendar, with the Mayan year coming out to exactly 365.2420 days. The ancient Mayans were so dependent on nature itself that this extreme precision was considered necessary in the calendar and in mathematics. Rituals to influence the movement of the heavens were never missed, and believers would be so fanatic as to sacrifice

their own blood or entrails in order to control the weather.

“Zero, huh…” Octavio wiped away tears that had welled up as he yawned.

“Zero. T *odo y nada* . The very truth and principle of this world. Perhaps the very thing we’re pursuing here in the birthplace of the zero has a nature similar to that of zero itself.”

Octavio had dozed off, lulled by the vibration of the car, but Joaquín was listening carefully, humming in interest. It was like a scene from their childhood: Joaquín had always been the one in charge of listening to their teachers’ lectures.

“The two of you are like the binary system given human form,” their teacher said, changing the subject. “You rush towards any possibility like the number 1, Octavio, and you are a bottomless receptacle of knowledge like the number 0, Joaquín. I find it very interesting.”

Eventually, the stone pyramids that towered over the trees at a height of over 70 meters were behind them. After the ruins faded into the distance, they saw fields that had been burned after the harvest. The white flowers and red fruits of the coffee plant remained, as it was a crop harvested late into the season in Antigua. Birds and deer wandered the forests and women picked the coffee fruits by hand, creating a rich ecosystem. After turning onto and driving down an unpaved gravel road flanked by kapok and mahogany trees, they reached their destination.

It was said this village, with its *camuflaje* [camouflage] from the woods and isolation from the center of Guatemala, now housed the guerrilla army. Weakened by the People’s Army, they had forced out the original inhabitants and set up base here. Even the *polleros* seemed to have gone somewhere else. Those men did more than just smuggle humans—they also made their living by growing and distributing drugs and carrying out thefts and kidnappings. The village was utterly deserted, the atmosphere silent and mournful.

The Foundation vehicles slowed down out of an abundance of caution. The village consisted of a cross-shaped formation of several houses with a circular plaza at its center, all surrounded by trees. Although they were called houses, their inhabitants were only shielded from the elements by rippled roofs of sheet metal or simple layers of stone, living in crumbling walls on foundations that had collapsed in spots. In a corner of the plaza sat a large water tank, rusted and blackened from neglect. Dried weeds curled in the wind, and the undergrowth bent and twitched. An empty, handwoven hammock hung between two trees, creaking with each sway.

“It didn’t seem like he was giving false information…”

Octavio grumbled as he gazed upon the depressing scene.

Joaquín rolled down the window. The wind carried the scents of wax, tree sap, and earth.

“I hate the countryside, Joaquín.”

All Joaquín gave to Octavio’s complaint was a wordless grunt.

“Maybe this was all the army’s doing, or they moved because they knew they would be exposed,” offered J.D.

In other words, we were too late, and we came all this way for nothing? Although he was glad they would be going home, Octavio decided it would still be worth it to give the houses a top-to-bottom search. He opened the door and stepped out, only to jump as soon as he put his foot on the ground. “Ow!” he shouted, clutching his foot. He had stepped on the exposed prongs of a half-buried rake for hay.

“Dammit, that was definitely a *trampa* [trap] . This is why I hate the sticks.” The tips of Octavio’s toes were injured, so severely that he couldn’t put his foot on the ground.

They found signs of life in the area. All sorts of things were

scattered outside of the houses. On the ground, they found circles and squares recently drawn in chalk by children. “A game of hopscotch,” Lisa Lisa observed as she looked out from the car. Perhaps some *polleros* had lived here with their families.

“Let’s look around. There may be some stragglers.”

Investigators came out from cars parked in the shade at J.D.’s command. J.D. did the same after asking Lisa Lisa to stay where she was. Joaquín joined them, taking care not to step on anything as he did. But something happened right as the younger investigators came out from the back row of cars. A loud rumbling emanated from the earth, shaking their very bodies.

In the blink of an eye, the investigator disappeared into thin air.

A pit had appeared beneath and swallowed them up.

Amid the whirling sand and thunderous roar, the ground began to collapse as if its support had disappeared, its sides pouring in like an avalanche.

Sand and rocks flew in the air. The quicksand didn’t stop at the investigator’s waist—they had been swallowed up entirely. Not even a glimpse of their head was visible.

“Hey, what’s g—”

J.D. called out the investigator’s name to see if they were all right, but no answer came. His voice was swallowed up by the hole.

What was that? What just happened? Was it a *hoyo* [hole] ? But it was on a different scale, nearly 2 meters in diameter. He dashed to the pit, with another investigator, but they couldn’t confirm the status of the person who had fallen in. It was too deep. All they could see in it was darkness. This wasn’t just some childish *travesura* [prank] obscured with dirt and grass. The ground itself was caving

in. It was no different from a mudslide or landslide. A bomb dropped from above wouldn't have been enough to make a crater this deep. This was a bottomless abyss.

"Hey, what the hell?! What's going on?!" Octavio shouted.

"I don't know! What *is* this…?!" J.D. braced himself.

"Is it an *hoyo* ?! It's an *hoyo* , isn't it?!"

"…This?! This isn't anything so simple!"

"Then is this even natural? What's wrong with the earth's crust here?"

Investigators who had scattered in all directions came rushing back to help their comrades. One of them vanished in another cave-in.

This one was better observed by the group. When the victim had stepped over one of the lines of chalk, the cliff underneath him collapsed, sending him down into the pit screaming. Soon, his cries gave way to silence. Just then, another yell sounded behind them, but by the time they turned around, yet another investigator had vanished.

All that stood in his spot was a hole… A hole… A hole!

"Nobody move an inch!" J.D. shouted. Octavio and Joaquín froze instantly. "This isn't just a cave-in or a natural disaster… This is a *trampa* , an…"

It was an attack.

But from whom?

A *pollero* ? Were they laying *trampas* all over the area?

Holes like this had a history of being used to capture large animals and had also been part of battle strategies in recent wars. It saw frequent use in guerrilla warfare by groups such as *FAR* and the People's Liberation Army in the counteroffensive, the warning line, and the parting gifts left behind after evacuation. But no human could ever craft a hole as deep and well-concealed as this one. If this was an attack, it was similar to the *balas invisibles* . J.D. instinctively knew that a hidden power, *las Maravillas* , would be put on display again. So, what were the fundamentals and laws of these abilities?

Suddenly, Joaquín let out an "Ooh, ooh-aah!", sounding like a bird of the tropics. He was pointing insistently at the ground to where circles, triangles, and squares were drawn in chalk. Had all of them been there when they first arrived?

"I know what you're trying to say, Joaquín! I saw it too," called J.D. "This is a special kind of attack! Anybody who steps inside of a shape drawn in chalk will fall into a hole! I'll say it again—whatever you do, nobody step inside of the lines of chalk!"

"But I already have…" Octavio's voice wavered.

"What?! Okay, stay right where you are!"

Turning his gaze to Octavio, J.D. saw that the man's left foot was in fact over a white line, and yet the ground didn't collapse beneath him. He had reflexively stiffened up, like a man who had accidentally stepped on a landmine. Joaquín pointed to his partner, copied his posture, and then lifted up his right foot.

Octavio clutched his right foot as it dripped with blood and stood on his left leg. *That's right—this is hopscotch…*

Following Joaquín, J.D. too had finally grasped one of the fundamentals of how this ability worked.

Octavio finally yelled back. "I get it now… This is just *rayuela*

[hopscotch] ! *Los niños* [the boys] in Antigua are always playing this on the stone tiles. You're safe as long as you hop through the shapes without putting both feet in one shape, right? Now that I know that, this'll be a piece of cake!"

Joaquín, J.D., and all the surviving investigators stood on one foot. J.D. ordered them to focus on getting back to the cars before they began to work out a rescue plan. Each investigator began to hop back on one foot.

"How the hell'd it get to *this* ?" muttered Octavio. The *señora* and *hombre mosca* had been one thing, but this just seemed like some kind of magical spell or sigil! "Huh, you really can't see the bottom of the holes. What happened to all the guys who fell, *Señor* Hernández? You think they're on the other side of the Earth now?"

"Who knows? For now, we just need to focus on getting out of here…"

"Hey, look!"

Octavio and Joaquín yelled at the same time. J.D. couldn't believe his eyes as he wobbled on one leg. There was no crouching person, nor a stick of chalk. And yet, a dash of white limestone powder was forming along the ground. A large circle was drawn, followed by a square right next to it. Shapes, large and small, were being drawn all over, multiplying like a rash. They just kept coming, one after the other.

The lines appeared as if they were being drawn by some invisible evil spirit. These *hoyo* -summoning sigils were proliferating with no end in sight. A dizzying amount of circles accumulated. The shapes multiplied, squares intersecting with pentagons, forming a complete geometrical pattern. The patterns blanketed the ground like a Tibetan mandala, rendering it practically impossible to navigate without being on one foot.

"Whoa! Nobody put your other foot down! Hop back on one foot!"

“I can barely even step on this foot! You think I can *hop* on it?!”

“Stop getting distracted and just hop back there!” J.D. managed to keep giving orders even as he seemed like he could fall over any moment.

Staying balanced on one foot was hard enough for J.D. without factoring in the chaos and tremors all around him. The sand clouds swirling around him blocked his field of vision. The car was only about ten meters away, and yet it seemed so far… Suddenly, his left leg throbbed with a dull pain. He began to stumble forward, enough to make him fear that he was about to put both feet on the ground.

“ *Señor* Hernández, y-your leg—!” an investigator screamed.

What the hell? J.D.’s left thigh was being stabbed by the tip of a rusty sickle. *Where’d that come from?*

“Holy shit! I was right—somebody’s here with us!” Irritation edged Octavio’s voice. “They’re attacking us to try and stop us from staying on one foot!

A terrifying number of sickles, hatchets, knives, and rakes came flying towards them. Practically every kind of lethal weapon was being thrown. It was impossible to tell where they were coming from amid the chaos and whirling sand. If nothing else, it was obvious that there was more than one assailant. Crouching figures hid in the shadows of dilapidated houses and trees—even when the investigators sensed silhouettes dancing across their fields of vision, they immediately vanished and could be seen no more. It all made the village itself seem like one big *trampa* , attacking in waves to toss uninvited visitors into the depths of Hell.

“Aaaagh!” The investigator’s other leg had been struck by a hatchet, causing his knees to buckle. He stopped his fall at the last second with a hand, but the *trampa* activated regardless. The ground slid with a massive rumbling noise as he became the next to be swallowed up.

“Using your hands won’t work, either! You need to have only one point of contact with the ground at all times!”

“Whoa, that was close!”

Just after dodging a hatchet, Octavio’s uninjured leg was struck by a knife that had come from the other direction. It sent him careening sideways, but he managed to stop his fall by slamming his hand on the tiny buffer offered outside of the lines of chalk with a loud yell.

He brought himself back into a standing position and immediately threw J.D., who had been rendered immobile by a hatchet in his left thigh, over his shoulders to carry him. Octavio managed to hobble along with the weight of two people resting on his single injured foot.

“Octavio, y-you’re injured too—”

“Dammit, I’ve had it! How the hell are we supposed to fight this?!”

“We’re evacuating. Get back to the car!”

“Joaquín! Are you all right?!”

Joaquín replied to Octavio’s call with a grunt. He had evaded injury in both of his legs, and was nimbly hopping to the cars faster than anyone else.

“What’s wrong, Joaquín?”

“Unh, unnnh, unh, unnnh!”

“What, the cars? What’s wrong with them?”

“Unh, unh, unh!” Joaquín yelled. He was trying to point something

out.

" *Señor* H-Hernández, look…"

"I see it. There's chalk…"

"…around the cars."

White lines of chalk were being drawn around the parked 4x4s. An invisible evil spirit was enclosing them in a massive square.

Octavio and J.D. realized what was happening. This wasn't a *trampa* that only worked on two-legged humans. Cars had four points of contact with the ground…

The ground collapsed the moment the chalk shape was completed. Pieces of shattered earth spewed up from beneath the cars; a sharp crack pierced the air, mingling with the sound of the engines. Pressure and gravity pushed the four-wheel-drive cars into the hole right beneath them. The earth collapsed like a waterfall of dirt and billowing sand, plunging into the abyss like an ice shelf plunging into an ocean. *Lisa Lisa's in one of those cars…*

The shockwave from the collapse winded Joaquín. The deafening cracks the ground gave were like the agonized cries of the Earth itself. The cars were falling. How long would they fall? "This is war," somebody said. If it wasn't that, it was a *caricatura* [caricature] of war. Joaquín and Octavio finally realized just how difficult the task of facing *las Maravillas* with no ability truly was. They had no way of knowing where a *trampa de muerte* [death trap] might lay. They couldn't even trust the very ground they stood on. This was like walking into the fog of war unarmed, into a whirlpool of flying projectiles and booby traps.

J.D. was the one to charge straight into this fog of swirling sand. Octavio and Joaquín followed him. Knowing it was as foolish a decision as throwing themselves off a cliff, they tried to leap into the bottomless pit their superior was in. Had the hole's reaction

come a moment later, they may have succeeded. Smoke, sand, and car parts that should have been far away now flew back up like the spray of a geyser, transforming into sparkles like tiny shards of glass high in the air. People at the rim were bathed in a wave of energy that gushed from the pit like wind. When they grabbed the end of her muffler, they didn't even need to pull. Lisa Lisa sprang out with a bounce like she was performing a pole vault. She had come back without even a scratch.

"I've never seen anything so unrealistic," Octavio muttered, dumbfounded.

Lisa Lisa had pushed her muffler—her weapon of incredible grace and strength—to its limit, making it act as a powerful spring so she could leap out of the abyss. Now, she was even using it for acrobatics, standing upright with only its tip in contact with the ground. It was within the chalk lines, but there was only one point of contact. Lisa Lisa was safe.

"You didn't die after going through *that* ?"

"Seems not."

"What the hell kind of training do you do to be able to pull off a stunt like that as an *abuela* ?"

"Looks like we can't take the cars anymore. Are we going to have to walk home, Hernández?"

"Ma'am, this was an attack by the user of one of those abilities. In this short span of time, we've already lost five members of our team. We need to retreat immediately and form a plan."

"Retreat? There's no need for that. I was just about to speak with you," Lisa Lisa explained from her strange position. "This has just given us more data. We must fully understand how those abilities are used in local battles like this. We're on the receiving end of a sneak attack from an enemy who refuses to show themselves. What

we need to do here is find them. It looks like this ability can't spread its power and influence over a wide area."

Now, Lisa Lisa asked her audience to consider their other example from Antigua. This user had always been somewhere within his ability's effective range. It was known that the landslides here had varied in severity based on position. The differences in size and depth were clearly visible. And one building looked out at the area where the power was most concentrated and the holes were the largest…

That's it! I get it now! Octavio stopped listening to Lisa Lisa and hurriedly hopped towards it. Joaquín followed him a moment later. They knew which way to head without a single word to one another. Ignoring the injuries on both of his legs, Octavio hopped powerfully with his foot scraping the ground, all the way to a water tank in a corner of the plaza. Upon closer inspection of the rusted surface, he found a peephole. Octavio climbed the ladder leading up to the lid on top of the tank in a flash and looked into the tank. *Whoa! There's somebody in here!*

The user of this ability, which was later dubbed "Hopscotch" in the investigation files, would be in the Speedwagon Foundation's custody by the day's end. She was a *mestizo* , and only 15 years old.

Her pupils were as dark as pits, and it was as if you could hear them dilate. Her expression was that of a girl who had given up all hope and fallen into nihilism. She had chewed her lips so much that they oozed blood.

Her canary-colored hair fell in natural ringlets, now tangled and dirty like a tumbleweed. Traces of tears streaked her blackened, grimy cheeks, but any tears she would have shed in front of the Foundation had dried long before.

"He said to make everyone who came to investigate this village fall

down, whether they were government soldiers, guerrilla fighters or anybody else. He told me to lay a *trampa* and ambush them like antlion larvae do with their prey. I didn't want to go with them, so I didn't mind them leaving me behind."

This girl who said she had gone around 3 months without a bath or clean clothing, Izahela Mena-Mena, was not considered dangerous enough to straitjacket like the *monstruo* of Antigua was. Octavio recalled that she had collapsed from exhaustion, laughing weakly, as soon as he discovered her. Several other children who had been left behind like her also came into Speedwagon custody without resistance. They had been the ones throwing hatchets and knives, but the moment Izahela lost her will to fight, the *hoyo s* in the ground vanished. It looked as if there had never been any pits in the first place. The investigators who had fallen in lay unconscious in a nearby thicket, but the physical injuries they had sustained from the fall had not vanished. They were all as severely injured as if they had fallen off a cliff, having broken bones in countless places. Two of them were unable to recover and never woke up. Had its creator been more cunning and persistent, this trap may have caused much more damage than it did. "I can summon chalk," Izahela said after being brought to the Foundation base.

"I don't really get it myself, but whenever anybody moves on more than one foot in a place I've drawn chalk around, it makes them fall into a pit."

"How long have you known you could do this?"

"I'm the only one that can do it. All the other kids are just following my orders."

A large ruin in the city of Guatemala had been converted into a Speedwagon Foundation base. It was fully equipped for medical treatment and inspection of seized evidence. Notes were pinned to a map on the wall, and stacks of documents, some new and some old, formed mountain ridges. Octavio and Joaquín hadn't seen the room used for questioning yet. It contained what looked like a lie detector, an electric chair, and other strange equipment. Izahela

was in a stupor, seeming neither fearful nor relieved as she blankly looked around.

“When did you first find out that you could summon that chalk?” Lisa Lisa was handling Izahela’s questioning herself. She had Izahela lay down on a sofa as if she was at therapy and sat at a chair, her own legs crossed.

“It began when you met the *polleros , didn’t it* ?”

“My family tried to go to Mexico. But they tricked us. They shot us with an ancient-looking bow. They told us that useful people would survive, and all the rest were done for. I saw my father and little brother die like they had been poisoned. For some reason, I was the only survivor. They made me come with them to that place.”

One moment, she had the family with whom she shared the good times and the bad, the dreams of living in a new land, the optimism-stirring birdsong.

And then came her family’s screams, their blood, the sound of an arrow coming from behind. It pierced her shoulder, but instead of killing her, it left her with something beyond human understanding.

The next moment, she felt herself moving in a world shrouded in darkness. She was trapped in a space no light could penetrate, shoulder-to-shoulder with other men and women who had been forced here like her. They were only given scraps to eat, and they spent their time sprawled on the ground or slumped over. Those who hadn’t perished were woken the next morning, but with nothing to do, they simply cowered in the corner of their room. All of them were terrified.

Only ten people were there. She had no idea if the others had survived being shot by the Arrow like her. When they were led out by the traffickers, some came back, and some didn’t. It appeared Izahela passed some kind of test, because she was eventually taken out of confinement and put to work like a servant or livestock.

Listening to Izahela's *pena* [pain] from the next room, Octavio whispered to Joaquín with a rare expression of humility. "Am I cruel for hearing all that and being glad it didn't happen to me?"

"No matter where you go in this country, you can't escape war. Either one of us could have ended up in that chair. Right, Joaquín?"

When the exhausted Izahela finally gave in to sleep, she was handed over to the medical team. That night, Lisa Lisa entered the briefing room accompanied by J.D., causing the investigators and two apprentices who had been standing by to look over. Her cool and collected expression brought to mind a priest coming up to the pulpit with plenty of topics for his sermon.

"Unlike Fabio Ubuh, Izahela has provided many clues pertaining to the people we are searching for."

She used her cane to point to a spot on the map that was pasted on the wall. It was a mountain range south of Guatemala, situated on the border between Brazil and Peru.

"Let's rewind to seven years ago, in 1966. When a magnitude 8.1 earthquake struck Peru, it caused large deformations in the earth's crust below this mountain range. A geographical investigation was carried out by a certain research organization, 40 kilometers east of the capital of Lima and a town connected to it by highway, Pucallpa. Researchers who entered an area that had a new, large-scale depression suddenly fell with unexplained illnesses. It's said that most of these illnesses resulted in unnatural deaths, but three or so exhibited strange changes in their bodies, such as spontaneous combustion or electrical discharge. It's believed that in the process of the geographical investigation, they had come into contact with a strange mineral that had been exposed by the earthquake, causing them to be infected with an unknown virus. At the very least, we know that a pathogen that had been lying dormant in the ground was unearthed by the changes in the earth's crust. In most cases, the virus will make hosts resemble a jambalaya fit for a monster, but in a small percentage of hosts, it is used in a specific way. My understanding is that, along with its extreme acuity, this pathogen

encroaches on our own souls and consciousnesses and overwrites our very composition."

Like many of the most contagious diseases in history, humanity only happened to come across this pathogen because of the times it lived in, a kind of fate. She explained that pathogens carried from the polar regions, undeveloped areas, old-growth forests, and the deepest caves were very rarely beneficial to the host, but most were unable to manage the sudden changes to their own bodies. In this way, some viruses have built symbiotic relationships with humans since ancient times. Whether it's the bacteria lurking in our brains or moving in our stomachs, we are already host to billions and trillions of microorganisms.

"There is also the fact that this virus may lie hidden in the earth in places other than Peru. As deep layers of the earth are brought to light once more in a new era, this could irreversibly change the course of human history, the same way it changed after humanity encountered tuberculosis, malaria, and influenza."

"…Hey, what's she getting at?" Octavio whispered into Joaquín's ear, having utterly lost the plot.

It appeared the other investigators had already heard some part of this, but even they had no idea where this speech about the aims of the Foundation was headed. Lisa Lisa's tone, as grave as a passage from the *Biblia* and as cold and hard as steel, made both Octavio and Joaquín gulp.

"After becoming an advisor to the Foundation, I devoted myself to researching this incident. I discovered that in the distant past, there were cases of people finding and harvesting this very mineral in regions other than Peru for their own purposes. It's said they carved the ore into an arrow that was used as a vector for the virus—the very same Arrow that struck Izahela. In other words, that arrowhead is made up of a material with the same characteristics as the unknown mineral."

Lisa Lisa and her team had already been conducting investigations

past the border for a while now, but never came to any proper conclusions. They had no way of getting in touch with the families of the victims who could provide valuable testimony and evidence. Like the Bermuda Triangle and Hanging Gardens of Babylon, it was a story that existed only in legends and rumors… until they had heard Izahela Mena-Mena's testimony today.

"So who made the Arrow, and why?"

Lisa Lisa tossed this vague question about this mystery of their world at Octavio and Joaquín.

The heartbeats and breathing of every person in that briefing room seemed to stop at that moment. Octavio and Joaquín looked at one another, seeing absolute cluelessness in the other's eyes. Their minds were tearing at the seams.

"There was once a man who wanted to be as powerful as a god. He was a member of a family who had lived eternally since time immemorial, or perhaps a descendant of that family, and he instinctively sensed the true value of this unknown virus and came up with a scheme to turn the mineral into Arrows. We decided on that theory after consulting with many thinkers and researchers. One person who had superior foresight predicted the world that was to come and unearthed this ancient secret, bridging the past and the future."

Lisa Lisa went on to explain that there appeared to be not one, not two, but several of these so-called Arrows in existence. By the very nature of their form, they had spread far and wide across the world, pierced many, and appeared in war zones and regions of conflict.

"Izahela, that girl, told us all of this in her testimony. It appears that several of these Arrows have fallen into the hands of the *polleros* who brought her and the other children into that position —into the hands of their leader, Alhorn."

Upon hearing that name for the first time, Octavio repeated it,

mulling it over in his head.

So the cause of this outbreak of strange powers in Guatemala was the Arrow, a tool from ancient times that awakened abilities that surpassed human knowledge…

Izahela wasn't the only victim. Had Fabio Ubuh and countless others been shot by the Arrow?

What did this man named Alhorn plan to do by awakening so many people's abilities? Was he planning on making them the private army to his very own kingdom? Did he want to go against established values and overthrow society and state? Or was he making an investment in the human and drug trafficking businesses? Whatever the case, this man was more than a simple trafficker. He was a criminal who had ought to be topping most wanted lists all throughout the world. Lisa Lisa held her hands aloft like the plates of a balancing scale as she spoke. This man named Alhorn was using the Arrows to screen potential underlings. Either they were weeded out, or they were revived with a new vitality.

"Our duty is to bring these dispersed Arrows under Foundation management. For the time being, we must focus on capturing Alhorn and his underlings here in Latin America and retrieving the Arrows in his possession."

At night, Guatemala was ringed by a horizon as dark as the void and domed by a sky crowded with stars.

Octavio, who had been completely taken in by his leader's speech, came out onto the facility's terrace after the briefing, his cheeks convulsively twitching even when exposed to the fresh air. His eyelids drooped, his head hung, and he trailed off when he spoke. If he let his chin fall to his chest and stretched out his arms now, he would look like a statue of Jesus on the cross. He seemed to be restless due to his surging emotions. Even Joaquín had never seen

his friend in this state.

However, Octavio didn't need to speak for Joaquín to understand him. In the silence, Octavio's thoughts were as clear as glass.

Octavio wanted to say: " *This is a rarity for me. A miracle is unfolding here, just for me. Right now, I'm being called upon to act and decide…* "

Balas de moscas [bullets of flies] flew. Wings buzzed. The sound of an *hoyo* caving in echoed all around them.
Echoes of the strange events Octavio and Joaquín had experienced unceasingly reverberated in the back of their minds. Chaos, screams, tears, viscera, the fog of war. When they closed their eyes, eye-searing scenes of battle replaying themselves on the backs of their eyelids. When they looked up, they felt as if the ground and sky had been reversed, a bottomless pit looming beneath them, ready to suck them into the abyss the moment they let down their guards. Joaquín kept his feet planted firmly on the ground so that he wouldn't fall into the sky, but Octavio just had a hint of a wry smile.

"So this means that all sorts of unique abilities are being awakened. If someone's chosen by that Arrow that the *abuela* was talking about…"

Octavio opened his mouth to speak. Joaquín saw something foreboding in his profile. This was more than mere impulsiveness—it was his troublesome nature rearing his head once more. His insatiable ambition, his dreams of power… In this land so dry it seemed to evaporate hope itself, where people slept day and night like they were dying of thirst, it was Octavio who shouted that he would do whatever it took to escape this reality.

"If I was, what do you think would happen to me, Joaquín? Would I bite the dust, or would I get some incredible power? Hearing a story like that would make anyone wonder, don't you think?"

Stop thinking about things like that, Octavio. Joaquín grasped his neck

as if he was trying to feel the words that rose up to the top of his throat, but the words for the rebuke never came.

“Isn’t that a natural thing to think after hearing that?”

The throbbing pulses and pounding heartbeats deep in their bodies only grew stronger. Neither could deny that a new door had opened. There was no going back to how things were before after listening to such a story. They felt trapped in a swirling vortex of vertigo, or like a cancer had begun to spread in their bodies.

On the distant horizon, they saw a faintly white, faintly red flame that flickered. It was in the northeastern forests, where the ancient stone towers and ruins lay. It seemed it could have been a farmer burning off the land, but this fire had no hopeful glare. The light was like a long sigh after the passing of many things, as vague as a faint memory from a past life. In spite of himself, Joaquín became weak at the knees. It seemed as if his body could take off right there and silently tear through the night sky like a runaway kite. But Octavio grazed his shoulder with his fingertips, as if to ground him. Octavio’s face turned toward Joaquin. Joaquín’s shifting expression, with eyes full of an indescribable emotion, lips drawn taut, and shoulders stiff, spoke for him more elaborately than it ever had before. *I don’t know how far I can go, my friend, but will you follow me for as long as you can?*

To be continued…